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TO ANNIE

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THESEUS

"What am I? O thou sea, with all thy noise,
Thou tell'st me not:—and thou great sun, that leavest
Once more thy ruby red on little clouds
Where thou hast dived from sight, art mute and art
No parent of an answer to my prayer,
My daily prayer to thee. Those clouds, are they
As I am? and shall I, as they will, lose
What fastens now the eyes of men on me?
Youth, as they say, is that but as yon red
Which dims while I gaze on it, dims and fails
Before the breath of all-disabling night?
It makes me shudder: is there such a breath
To conquer youth and make men lose their glow?
A gulf to swallow youth as night those tints?
And shall I scurry as the storm-chased cloud,
Darkling and teased to tears, and torn with groans?
Ah, must it come upon me to be spent
And no more heard of? Is there a gulf like that?

The men I meet, have they been once like me,
And has a tyrant force so bowed their backs,
Browbeaten them and taught them furtive haste,
Made all their actions relish of escape
From Fate, that only baffler of the gods?
For even the old man, who has lived well

Whose smile of fortitude has blessed and blessed,
Day after day, his friends through fifty years,
When his knees totter and his arm grows weak,
Though the gods love him, yet, to please Fate, he
Must be content to palter and lose all;
'Neath cover of a smile, be quite undone,
Yea, steal away, stand by, and let the grand
Converging circumstances tempt in vain
To some exploit worthy his life laid down,
Needed by all the world, but which weak hands
And knees that shake can now forbid him bring
To masterful fruition. Yea, Fate's fool,
Amidst the dearth of younger men endowed
With spirit and resources like his own,
He must sit down, give counsel, then unsay;
Even as I have had to fume 'mid men
Who lacked my heart, yet own'd the strength I lacked,
And watch the chance go by—feeling it fleet,
The unseized moment when a god cried 'Dare!'
'Tis sullen Fate thus thwarts the hopeful god,
Thus ends the good man, thus begins with me;
Who oftenest, ah! cloudeth the whole life's course,
Who treads close at the heel, breathes in the neck,
—Yet drives no sharp spear crashing through the breast,
Plunges no knife sideways between the ribs,
And cracks the skull beneath no knotty club,

Nor throws a noose about the craning neck,—
But fouls the action in the doing, mars
The work between the hands, and wries the thought
Before the lips have shaped it; mocks all hope
With wretched failure, and forbids to mend,
Spurring us ever to disaster new:
It is so, comes upon me, I shall fail;
For I have failed before; each year have failed
To roll this stone aside, which hides the proof,
The sign of whether I am no man's son,
Begotten of a man who wore a sword,
Or of some rascal whose long tongue deceived
A woman's heart. Shame hounds me when I think
That I have cheeks which flush to hear men's praise,
Who cannot say that I am such an one,
And add thereto 'my father sails afar'
Or 'fetcheth golden apples from the tree
That the sweet women sit beneath and sing,'
Or 'is in Cyprus, where he works a mine,'
Or 'followeth wars in Thrace,' or 'seeks a cure
At Delphi for some strange unkind disease.'
Thus other lads can vaunt and need not come,—
What day the sun behind yon little isle,
Each autumn sets for one who standeth here,—
They need not come down to this lonely beach
And tug at this dull stone, till they are faint;

Nor as their limbs grow cold ache with despair,
To hope and craven fear not slaves by turns;
And, if they oftener bear defeat in speed
Or when we wrestle, fence, or hurl the quoit,
A father teacheth what there lacked, and how
With greatest likelihood to compass it.
While I
Visit my mother where she sits and works,
As women work, weaving in wall-cloths wide
Figures of men and gods, and hear her talk
As women talk, with smiles and hopeful words.
Oft will she bid me stand in such a way
As Heracles or Jason rightly stand,
Then silently doth bend her to her task,
That she may fill their pictures out from mine;
While I forget her and that busy room,
Watching those heroes lay the red fir poles
Before the prow of Argo on the grass,
High up some glade, high in the forest hills,
Whence the vast Ister and Absyrtus draw
Their waters, and where stags, of huger build
Than horses, stand forth on the brows of cliffs
And bell at man's intrusion, ere they turn
With long quick strides to seek yet virgin wilds.
From morn to eve, before the Argo there,
They laid the poles, then dragged her over them;

And on they toiled, week after week, right up;
Then rigged as 'twere a second keel of plank,
And sledded her across the fields of snow,
And to encircling ocean brought her down.
They did this: I, who helped them in my thought,
Have heard my mother laugh, and waked to know
She could not tell me who my father was."

Thus far the lad with many a heart-drawn sigh;
Then eased his shoulders of their short grey cloak,
And tossed his hat of straw upon the ground.
Firm in vague twilight, naked, fleckless, blond—
Save that a sandal strap still laced each foot
And that his head was dark with clustered curls—
He stood as those whose prayer bestirs mute lips;
Then gravely did approach a sea-worn rock
Half buried in the shingle, wan; for sand,
With which the scouring wind its slatey hue
Had scored, was lodged in all its hollows, wan
With livid marblings, lonely, rounded, smooth,
Planted as for a bourne unto that sea
Whose hoarse waves gnawed the grating beach hard by.
While, back from there, in dry and yellow reeds
Which belted the cove round, wind rattled bleak.
Beyond, dark hills rose, tranquil as the sky.
Suddenly his curls shook, he felt both arms,

Searched with his feet for purchase, then bent down
And digging with both hands in the loose beach
Obtained a thorough grip. His foothold gave
And gave beneath each crooked and straddled leg;
Their knees touched to the beach, pressed in, dug down,
While sinews on broad thighs, his hollowed loins,
And curved back hardened, knotted, and showed up:
Sweat, from a streaming forehead, dripped into
Those dangling curls which bounced before his eyes
And teased that burning furnace of his face:
But the stone gave, and his subsiding effort
Sank down upon it shifted in its bed.
Some time he sobbed, then knelt and sucked his hands
Bleeding and numb, and pinched between salt stones:
Rose then; his knees were raw; his chin was rasped,
For he had ground it on that sullen block;
With deep-drawn breaths he poised his limbs in the air,
Relaxed their o'er-strained joints, and chafed their thews;
And, having mopped his hot brow with his cloak,
Sat down and smiled because the stone had moved.

Ah! who shall say how his heart's throbs died down,
As war-noise in beleaguered town subsides
At night-fall; for the sentries clearly see
The foemen building fires to cook their meal.
For then, as women creep out to the walls

To find their wounded husband or dead son,
His fears came out to rummage likelihoods—
Disturb the calculating eye that broods
O'er the main chance, and,—as a hapless girl
That, having sought and sought and nowhere found,
Not even a lover's corse to lave and tend,
But knows he has been butchered, or else shipped
Afar in noisome mine to feel the lash,
Goes frantic and runs screaming through the night,—
So one fear did bedin his brain the most,
And made all life seem madness, and the gods
Unhearing scorns at distances extreme.
—If he should roll the stone back from a blank,
An empty bed! His heart stood still! There was
No future; such a moment ought to be
The last!—yet, as the old gnarled warrior stands
Hearing that girl run mad, so still, within,
There stood a knowledge that foresaw the morn
And the spent tatters of that storm of grief
Subdued, ungoverned, drifting through the streets,
Drift on through wildered prattle, sometimes laugh,
But never know itself and hopes again;—
So, far within, he saw all time succeed,
No consonancy in it with the days—
Those days of sterling effort, gone before.

He thought it best almost to now give up.
But then the all-conquering hope to find a god,
A hero at the least, had been his sire,
Brought him upon his feet and cleared his mind:
That which was raised from good must go to good;
But from a lie the fair thing sprung at first.
Would be reduced and end in utter waste.

Choosing such larger stones as gave foothold,
He banked them up where he his feet would rest;
And, having scooped quite clear sufficient grip
For his sore-smarting hands, a second time
He bowed his back and worked down with his knees,
And heeded not annoy from clammy curls,
But put his soul into his boyish arms,
And hugged and raised the stone, then rolled it over,
Dragged by sheer weight himself, dragged sideways down;

Not long to lie, for he had seen! now saw!—
For into heaven, lo! the moon had glid,
Between their woods the dewy hills were grey,
And 'mid the reeds lagoons were path'd with light,
While countless silver patines danced at sea,—
Saw! saw! in sheath of inlay capped with gold
A sword, its baldrick, and beneath, a shield
Cased in a leathern bag, but printed through,

And on the bag large words, "My son, my Theseus,
That worthy of thy sire now hast proved,
Come to me, come to Attica, in Athens,
Ask for King Ægeus, and bring with thee these."

Much am I wronged, and Colchis far away
I curse; for there this tortured heart first beat—
Ah, gently as the summer aspen's leaves
Then beat! but now, I know not if it beat,
Or hath but recollection of loud thuds,
That drearily echo through its stony wards.
Severe Orthia, mistress of my youth,—
Thwart Hecate, that scowledst on my choice
When I was even so foolish as to love,—
Artemis, that repairest the youth of trees
And yearly fledgest woodland glades with fern,—
This have I woven, this my needle wrought
Slowly to beauty,—as thy Spring adorns,
Fold after fold, a rich and worthy land—
With leaves of varied shapes, with tints of green
More subtly diverse than the lyre's notes,
With blossoms of a flute-like rapturous hue,
Sheer bliss in blue, in pink or purple sobs,
Deep drone of reds and saffrons, shouts of gold:
And not content with this, but, god-like still,—
Since through the dusky inwards of the wood,
Between the branches, wings the feathered life
Whose rapid pulse astonishes the hand
Of ill-shod mortals trudging after joy,—
I have portrayed tit, finch, or crested wren,

Flashing athwart each sombre interspace
My broidered wreaths encircled; but the snake,
The silent pole-cat, fierce red ant, the wasp,—
These, though my thoughts were like them, are not here.
Yet here is what might make the forest groan,
To think its wizard influence had failed
Impress on any life a character
So secretly dread, though framed to almost please,—
This brown, not, like that of dead leaves, inert,—
This brown rich like the burnt cheek of a stone
Squared to be plinth unto some column grand;
Near which the masons light a little fire,
Whereat to broil their salt-dried fish in lard,
When o'er the cockling scales and stiff-ribbed fins,
Again, such browns mingled with golds, blue dusk,
And silver scorched, increase beneath the heat;
While sometimes, in the afternoon, a storm,
Parting his heavy indigo palls of rain,
Will show such browns above the sulphurous west;—
This brown, the dye in which I soused my web,
Is colour of poison; and for this is veiled
The light which else would make my chamber bland
As those which women love, or wives or maids,
To have for toilet, sleep, close thought, and prayer.
But I to Hecate have prayed alone,
And have foregone sweet aspect of white sheets

Which only where the light abounds seem pure;
And, for two months, have laboured without air,
Till I am livid, and this silver disk
Changes not hue to tell me I am sick,
But gives back eyes alone that look like life,
And all the rest like death, like Jason's love!

For I was married and ravished from afar,
And, for some gentle words and easy smiles,
Pretence of heat, effected, for that man,
All he had failed in else—to plough with bulls,
And sow the dragon's teeth, and those to slay
Who, fully-armed, sprang like a field of corn
Not through three months, but in three minutes, ripe;
These I enabled him to reap, and seize
The sacred serpent-guarded fleece of gold:
For, like a girl, I thought love was a god,
And I had lived in boundless hopes of love;—
Nor wearied reading scrolls of crabbed signs,
Nor ceased from skilful practice of my hands,
Whether I sprinkled sweet herbs over meats,
Or did distil tart syrups from rank canes,
Or ground to powder dried and pregnant roots,
Or with precisest measure mingled draughts
Compelling slumber or restoring health:
And, with a pride beyond my little size,

Scorned brawny suitors for their ignorance,
And gazed across the thrilling sea with hope,
Or kept my wakeful eyes upon the stars,
Whose millions intimate a prodigal power
Which, then, my eager thought assigned to love.
This fervency I, with myself, bestowed
On Jason for lip music and a smile.
And not this only, for a perjured man
I brought to childhood back,—thine aged foe,
Aeson,—my courteous bridegroom's palsied sire,
The soiled and blunted weapon doubled up,
Which oft thee wounded deep, Virginity;
For many wives his lust had gloried in,
And crowds of children from his veins had drained,
In petty and diluted measures, blood
That once was opulent, almost divine:
I, having drawn that weakness from his limbs
Which torpid now and chilly there abode,
Through every vacant artery did force
The green and joyous sap of thriving plants,—
Juice of crushed stalks mixed with their ropy gums,
And purpled bright with strength from berry and grape,
Full of a stinging, swift, and masterful
Vivacity;—his heart beat fast once more;
The man, remade, well-nigh resembled fauns
Who, houseless, worship trees,—a white-haired child

That, henceforth, sang himself to death in woods,
And bathed for very rapture in tall corn
And, silver-maned, by night the hill-brows haunted—
His eyes, the wonder and envy of younger men,
Beaming with joyance far surpassing theirs.
But in return for this, my husband wooes
Ripe Glauce, Corinth's daughter, and would bring
A second victim home unto his bed.
Therefore, I know that love is but a dream;
And with this toil have wholly purged my mind,
The while my pauseless needle stitched and stitched;
Setting my thought on baneful Hecate,
To rid myself of hope that dupeth all.
And energy in me has so increased,
That now I feel, my thought doth correspond
With that which wields the empire of the stars,
And fills sheer darkness with a smell of blood,
And sends the green growth forth from gloomy earth
With gifts, some good, the more part charged with harm,
But all disguised to attract, and those the most,
The deadliest, or least helpful. Thine I am,
Mother of Wolves delighting in the blood
Of dogs whom men have tamed, with pains and skill,
To guard their homes: thou Queen of Fears, whose lair
Is reached through endless caves, whose silver lamp,
Changeful and cold, distresseth female sleep,

—Driving for them all comfort from the night,—
With counsel to fond ruin from despair;
Urging them no more battle with their fate,
Not choose like thee virginity, but hope
Beyond themselves and eye the virile youth;
Yet only in our hearts do those goods dwell,
Which we so fondly seek in lustful man.

For one who eyed no youth, a man mature—
For Glauce, apt to love, have I prepared
This gown, so fit to fascinate the eye
Of a fond vanity-indulging bride.
Behold how it designedly is cut;
Look, goddess, am I careful to succeed,
With open slashes left along the sleeve,
Where the white radiancy of arms shall shine?
See, see, the bosom is, between the breasts,
To tempt her not to wear an undervest,
Pinked with sweet open-work, which creamy tints
Become far better than a cold white smock!
And I, indeed, do send the like advice
With this, my wedding gift, which now I crease
In strictly even folds upon the floor,
And thus incase, first with a veil of lawn,
Then matted yew sprigs packed in layers deep—
Both against light and chemic influence

Of Helios proof, in double thickness, last,
Of this new canvas bag, and cord it, so,
With scarlet; and my seeming kindly words,
Such as an aged wife might give to one
Whose youthful warmth shall solace her ag'd lord,
Here I insert beneath the knot, inscribed
On ivory tablets with style dipped in red.

As though I ne'er had married, Hecate,
Thine am I; and oh, shortly, when this robe
So gaily bloomed, so leafy, and so fair,
Draped on his second dupe, shall proudly meet
The warmth of nuptial altar-fires and sun,
At first with pleasant tingling, but soon, soon,
From smart increasing fast to blister and burn,
And scald, and seethe, and gnaw upon the flesh
It ever closer clings to,—in his sight,
Devouring those soft charms, the hope to enjoy
Had tempted him to call a second "Bride."
Soon, soon when I for thee, in utter dark,
Have put away my nearest, most real, hopes,
With a keen knife producing savour of blood
To fill thy tingling dark; Orthia dread,
My motherhood undone, returned to thee
With, for peace-offering dire, my murdered boys—
Who, if they lived, must live to be, or soon

Or late, supplanted by another's births
(Ah, thirty years envies their five and six,
Life's sweetest, closed at once, exempt from worse!)—
Thou, who art cruel too, but to be kind,
Propitiated by infanticide,
O give me part in life the self-complete!
Like to a shooting star, direct and swift,
In dragon-harnessed chariot, dip, dip down,
Glide near the earth, when, from it passing, thou
Shalt, out from blinding silver reaching forth,
Lift me beside thee, Virgin pure and strong;
And I will never more consider love,
Nor stoop to hope, but spend my days as thine
In governance of herbs, and caves, and tides,
Stars, and frail strays of virgin life, are spent.

LOVE'S FAINTNESS DEFIED

Kiss me!
Are we not farther from to-day
Than is to-morrow?
Steeped in reality, what love possesses,
Time doth but borrow;
Kiss me!
Canst fear what any voice may say,
When all man's knowledge clearly must be guesses?
Whilst joy is ours, like dogs to gain a bone
They'll fawn on us for what we leave alone.

Clasp me!
Like sand the falling moments close,
Stifling the weary:
To-morrow from to-day no force can sever,
Keepst thou but near me.
Clasp me!
Canst shudder at a falling rose,
When folly's proof must be, to prate of "ever"?
Whilst joy is ours, they'll seek us out to learn:
Those only died, who, loved, made faint return!

LOVE'S FAINTNESS ACCEPTED

Ah, love, love is not what
We hope, we dream it is;
Not sure of victory.
'Tis hot, but pain is hot;
Swords wound, so may a kiss.
Though love be energy,
Should flow a current in a sea,
A passing-by of life by life,
Of force by force, fire by lightning, strife
By battle, eclipse of zest by zeal;—
Yet slowly love's inevitable seal
At times informeth the half-molten, malleable,
Stiff hours of life whose surfaces congeal
Before the lordly signet hath repeal:
Even then 'tis stamped so plain, so strangely well,
That the impression may be traced by all,—
Blind fate, sceptre, crown, and golden ball.

LOVE'S LOSS LAMENTED

Birds sing but never speak;
Music is in the woods but not a word;
Nothing from flowers hath been heard;
Lips have sea-shells, no tongue;
And, though one through far caverns seek,
And though the silence there seem wrung,
No suffering hath the earth confessed;
In utterance for grief
No weeping cloud e'er sought relief;
And dumb woe heaves the ocean's breast.

O Mocked Heart, chant or brood!
Sob as trees leafy sough in rain!
That lily on thy brow explain
Never! Voice thou no tale!
An incommunicable mood
Be theirs who suffer wrong and fail
Not in themselves but through their love.
Why should such passion be confessed?
Entomb it ever in a breast
The wan flower grief may droop above.

The nightingales despair;
The woods are great with woe as they;
Even spring is very briefly gay;

Like waves the sad shells rave;
Each cavern echoes like prison stair,
By which but sighs escape the brave,—
Those wisest men, of the wisest lands,
Who failed to cure the wrong
That afflicts creation, time as long
As tides have worn the sands,—
That after bliss on the heart lays hands
But breaks it not, Mocked Heart, still strong!
But breaks it not, Mocked Heart, too strong!

A SECOND LAMENT FOR LOVE'S LOSS

O swift, O proud, O brave, O beautiful,
Thou steed, thou charger for a god,
What orient plateau hast thou trod?
Or, coursing steppes of heaven, didst thou pull
The Lord of Song
In gold car, full of joy, of rapture full?
For thou wast strong.

Oh pain! Oh wrong! Oh shame! Oh misery!
For now a groom, a base-born slave,
Has lashed thee; curbed thee, once so brave;
Thou to be noosed by cunning! furiously
To plunge, to fall,
Get up, rear, stumble, snort, foam, bleed, and be
Cowed after all!

Ah! favourite stallion of the sun,
When "Morning's Wonder" was thy name,
Effortless, dauntless wouldst thou run.
So noble once, art thou so tame?
Once swift, once proud, once brave, once beautiful,
What pain, what wrong, what shame, what misery
Has thine been that thou art not free?
That at this bridle thou shouldst pull?
O rash Desire, whose untaught eyes knew love,

Those tears are hot:
True love has ceased, has ceased to be true love;
What was is not.

xxxi.

THAT LAND

Oh, would that I might live for ever
Where those who make me happy dwell!
Because she other place names never
Desire doeth excellently well,
Now, wooing me;
There ease weds grace;
There thought is free,
Born like a smile upon a face,
Expressed as simply as a child
Kisseth its playmate, laughing gaily;
There, there, the courteous, joyous, mild
Train life to beauty daily,

There thought is free; for life is bound
Religiously, and sings while serving;
No hungry loneliness is found
Where beauty's law admits no swerving
But strengthens life;
Could I dwell there,
To me a wife
Were given wise and free and fair,
Not fettered with dead thoughts, not fainting
Because the night-mare world has lain
Athwart her hopes, but love acquainting
With beauty ever again.

Ever again and again
Filling the eyes of our child
With the milk of paradise,—
Of which the soul is fain,
For which the heart is wild,
And tears are in the eyes:
Ah! that milk of paradise
Is happiness,
Is power to bless;
What balmy air to halcyon's wing
That power to those who make me glad is;
To bind my life, in bonds to sing,
The way such freedom may be had is;—
The way to gain the power to bless,
The one way to win happiness.

KINDNESS

Of the beauty of kindness I speak,
Of a smile, of a charm
On the face it is pleasure to meet,
That gives no alarm!

Of the soul that absorbeth itself
In discovering good,
Of that power which outlasts health,
As the spell of a wood

Outlasts the sad fall of the leaves,
And in winter is fine,
And from snow and from frost receives
A garment divine.

Oh! well may the lark sing of this,
As through rents of huge cloud,
It breaks on blue gulfs that are bliss,
For they make its heart proud

With the power of wings deployed
In delightfullest air.
Yea, thus among things enjoyed
Is kindness rare.

For even the weak with surprise
Spread wings, utter song,
They can launch—in this blue they can rise,
In this kindness are strong,—

They can launch like a ship into calm,
Which was penn'd up by storm,
Which sails for the islands of balm
Luxuriant and warm.

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